

Asma's Cultural Awareness

Asma and Taylor

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In this and the next few recordings, I will be presenting some of my thoughts and conclusions about Asma's story and how it speaks to broader themes of culture, narrative, and what it means to be Somalian, a refugee, a Muslim woman, and a mother. In a typical ethnography, this would be my analysis chapter. Here, it will take the form of a series of recordings.

It makes sense to start with culture. Culture, as this kind of ephemeral term that captures how a group of people sees, acts, and believes in and about the world, is something that Asma is aware of. It is particularly visible because she has spent so much of her life travelling between cultures and learning how to live in them while also learning who she is and what she wants to do with her life.

yes

A: If you grow up one place, you can see the life one style. But if you grow up in a different place, your lifestyle is, is just like a season. [baby Halima cooing] It's just like a season, every year you have like a crazy season, so... When the people have two season in the year, maybe three season, you have it a more different. Yeah.

T: Did you like that?

A: I don't.

T: You did not like moving?

A: It's-it's-it's very hard. Yeah. Like I told you if, eh, you move to North Carolina one year, and Chicago two years, Ohio one year, it's like... You have more experience, but it can confuse sometimes the accents, the cultures, it's like um, even the food is changed.

It was
very
hard
but
I'm very
grateful
to day

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. [laughs] Yeah. It's kind of like crazy. This is the first time I stay ten years. Now I'm eleven years, I think.

T: Yeah.

A: It's the first time I stay ten years, same place.

Such an awareness—including her awareness that I am interested in culture and how she experiences it—is integral to her story. She is constantly encountering differences between life in Somalia and the United States, and that tension has compelled her to selectively adapt and adopt cultural norms and ideas throughout her life.

The following clip is a good example of her ability to see those differences and apply them to her own experiences. Here, I ask her what would be one thing from the United States that she would bring back to Somalia:

A: Managing my time.

T: Time management?

A: It is so important here.

T: Yeah?

A: Here, what I like is managing the time.

T: Yeah.

A: American people...the...They're I think they're most fast, fast, fast countries.

T: Yeah?

A: So the reason they, they reach their goal is, they're managing their time. Like that. [snaps twice]

T: Yeah.

A: Back home in Somalia, you would've shocked if you go there.

T: Yeah?

A: Nobody cares about time.

T: Mhm.

A: No one cares about the time [claps hands together]. I mean, you ask someone, you see me how I get late sometimes, I'm so sorry [laughs].

T: It's so okay!

A: I'm still...My, my culture is still holding me, but I try.

T: That's okay, that's okay!

A: Yeah, I try. So, back in Somalia...people free.

T: Mhm.

A: Most the time, people has a, their, their own businesses, except for teachers or something like that. If the teacher come late today—little bit, not that much, maybe fifteen minute, thirty minute, come late today—the students know whatever that.

yes

T: Yeah.

A: Another teacher will, will complete it, I mean will, will fill their time.

T: Yeah.

A: So they always have extra teachers there.

T: So you like it better that people manage their time here.

A: Yeah. I like it better, better.

T: Yeah?

A: If you make appointment with someone who's from Somalia, it, can you, like, after thirty minutes, after one hour, they will meet you.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah, you will know them, if you become on time, you're gonna have yourself there. [we laugh]

T: You've been, you've been pretty much on time for pretty much every meeting we've had.

A: Yeah, but I'm trying, I'm still...not on time. [laughs]

T: You're trying really hard?

A: At work, yeah, at work, if I come late every day, I be kicked out.

T: Yeah.

A: So yeah I learn a lot for managing my time...

Time management, then, is a difference Asma is very aware of. However, she also seems to see the benefits of both Somalian and American perspectives of punctuality. It is good to stay committed to a schedule, but there is also something "free" about not being so tied to a clock. Consequently, moving among cultures is not a black-and-white, right-or-wrong, Somalia-or-United-States switch, but an ever-changing dialogue about what it means to live in any culture and the potential values each way of life has.

Navigating the differences between the way she grew up and the United States' way of life sometimes feels like a balancing act, but other times, it feels like all Asma can do is try to understand and live in the culture she currently inhabits. This can mean trying to shake off her past cultural ideas to adopt new ones.

You are right

A: Say every year, I'm receiving like, uh... S—New idea, new life, new culture. Like, even I'm here, eh twelve years, um, eleven years old, uh eleven years, um, in America? Um. I didn't still have a, a, complete, um...culture shock information? I'm still learning day after day, something new.

T: Mhm.

A: Something new for me.

[fade]

A: I don't know how to celebrate [their marriage anniversary], and my husband don't understand me, I was like, oh, trying American culture, and my husband is standing for Somalian culture, we get confused [laughs].

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. So...

T: Do you feel like you've adopted more of American culture? Like, do you think you've kind of made it your own?

A: Yeah...I was um twenty years old—nineteen years old, not complete twenty years old—when I arrive in United State, but I [clears throat], I mean, nineteen years old still feels you're a mature, but you're not very mature.

T: Right.

A: You're still kids, so you're still learning a lot of things. So living different countries, growing up, like moving city to other city, country to country, so coming to America I see like I'm more taking American culture. I feel like I'm more taking American culture and forgetting little by little, for my, my-my country. Not forget it all, but trying to...work with this, uh, this culture. And still not have enough [breathy, nervous laugh]. Every day is like, I wanna take more and more and more and learn, like I wanna learn more. But...yeah. It's life-lifetime, you cannot learn one time, everything.

T: Right.

A: Yeah.

T: Right.

Creating an identity for herself that balances these two very different cultures is thus a difficult one. Like the Somali women Kristin Langellier interviews, Asma finds her own stability within this sea of cultural norms and expectations. Langellier puts this eloquently when she writes:

This anchor of identity is not a culturally pure 'inside,' whether located in Somali traditions or the Quran, but an anchor that travels with and against the narratives and counternarratives that would inscribe her as a Somali Muslim woman. Like a sea anchor, Caaliya attaches identity not to a fixed point on the sea floor, such as culture or religion, but to the water itself as a way to maintain headway in her movements across borders. (2010: 89)

Asma has spent her entire life floating along a constantly shifting sea of places and cultures. It is only in recent years that she has been able to really put down an anchor and settle, but she is still learning to navigate the swells and currents of the water she is swimming in. This is something she is incredibly aware of, and constantly negotiating, with varying degrees of stress and confidence.

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it sometime

Right